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Stigma Sentiments and Self-Meanings: Applying the Modified Labeling Theory to Juvenile Delinquents ABSTRACT

We use "stigma sentiments" as a way to operationalize the stigma associated with a juvenile delinquency label. Stigma sentiments are the evaluation, potency, and activity (EPA) associated with the cultural category "a juvenile delinquent." We find consistent support for the validity of the evaluation component as measures of these conceptions. Then we assess hypotheses derived from the modified labeling theory: we expect each stigma sentiment to be related positively to the corresponding dimension of self-identities among juvenile delinquents but unrelated to the corresponding dimension among nondelinquents. We find support for this hypothesis on the evaluation dimension. We also find two cross-dimensional results that were not anticipated. Specifically, among teenagers and young adults who have been adjudicated delinquent, the evaluation of "a juvenile delinquent" is positively related to self-evaluation, the potency of a "a juvenile delinquent" is negatively related to self-evaluation, and the activity of "a juvenile delinquent" is positively related to self-evaluation. By contrast, among teenagers and young adults who are not adjudicated delinquent, the meaning of the cultural category "a juvenile delinquent" is unrelated to self-evaluation. The results suggest that the cultural conceptions associated with the category of "a juvenile delinquent" do affect the selfmeanings of individuals charged in juvenile delinquency court, although the connection is sometimes more complex than a one-to-one relationship between a stigma sentiment and its corresponding dimension of self meaning.

Key words: affective meanings, juvenile delinquents, modified labeling theory, selfmeaning, stigma, stigma sentiments An early observation (Tannenbaum 1938) in the study of juvenile delinquency was that reactions to offenders may produce more offenses by those labeled delinquent. This observation was readily accepted by progressive criminologists, refined over time, and became what we call labeling theory (Lemert 1951; Becker 1963; Lofland 1969; Schur 1971; Scheff 1984). Generally, the theory says that persons become deviant when others sanction them for disapproved of behaviors. Potentially deviant behaviors are commonly not sanctioned (primary deviance), indicating that the response of others (labeling) is critical to becoming deviant. After being labeled, persons' interactions are altered in ways that establish repeated signals that they are deviant. This feedback alters self-concepts, creating a deviant identity. The deviant self-concept then produces behaviors that are consistent with the deviant label (secondary deviance).

This explanation for deviance was attacked by multiple researchers, with many finding that labeling is not a major cause of deviance (Paternoster and Iovanni 1989). Much of the concern was generated by misunderstanding of the theory, but such misunderstanding was fostered by proponents' weak specifications (Paternoster and Iovanni 1989). Weaknesses of the theory included the lack of a systemic explanation for ways a label is transformed into altered behaviors, lack of testable hypotheses, and lack of quantifiable concepts (Gove 1980; Tittle 1980). In response to the near dismissal of labeling theory, others began work to more precisely specify the theory and to delimit its scope. For example, Braithwaite (1989) pointed out that not all labeled persons are treated the same. Some are rejected while others are merely shamed. Matsueda (1992) used the concept of "reflected appraisals" (persons' perceptions of how other perceive them) to specify self processes that produce deviant identities, and to take into account the fact that significant others as sources of self-concepts may vary in reactions to potential deviants. Link (1987) and his colleagues (Link et al. 1989) created modified labeling theory which asserts that labeling is a negotiated experience, where many with the wherewithal can resist the efforts to make them deviant.

One result of the new research on labeling is the recognition that some persons who may have been ostensibly labeled should be excluded from analysis of the effects of labels. On the other hand, the internal process that creates a deviant identity from an effectively applied label is still not completely specified and supported with evidence. This research focuses on the transformation of self-concepts created by labeling, and continues the new work in labeling research to generate specify the labeling process and conduct tests of hypotheses.

According to the modified labeling theory of mental illness (Link 1987; Link et al. 1989), the negative consequences of a psychiatric label are rooted in cultural definitions of the "mentally ill." When an individual is diagnosed with a mental illness, cultural ideas about the mentally ill (e.g., incompetent, dangerous) become personally relevant and are transformed into expectations that others will devalue and discriminate against that person. The expectations of rejection are associated with negative outcomes: unemployment, low earnings and feelings of demoralization.

We explore this hypothesis as it applies to the labeling of juvenile delinquents. In this study we apply this idea to juvenile delinquents. We investigate two issues. First, we assess the construct validity of a new operationalization of the cultural conceptions of juvenile delinquents: the affective meanings (evaluation, potency, and activity) associated with the cultural category "a juvenile delinquent." Following Kroska and Harkness (2006), we term these meanings *stigma sentiments*. Second, we use this new measure to test the modified labeling theory hypothesis that cultural conceptions of the juvenile delinquents become personally relevant to individuals who have been adjudicated by a juvenile court as "delinquent."

Stigma Sentiments and Self-Meanings

We investigate a version of the modified labeling theory hypothesis on juvenile delinquents. We represent cultural conceptions of juvenile delinquents using the affective meanings of the cultural category "a juvenile delinquent," and we represent self-meaning using the affective meanings associated with self-identities. Among individuals adjudicated by a court as delinquent, we expect the affective meanings (evaluation, potency, and activity) associated with "a juvenile delinquent" to be related positively to the corresponding dimensions of meaning associated with self-identities ("myself as I usually am"). Among nondelinquents, by contrast, we do not expect these meanings to be related because nondelinquents have not received this identity-relevant label. Also, we expect these two relationships, or slopes, to differ significantly; that is, we expect juvenile delinquency status to modify the relationships between stigma sentiments and self-meanings.

Evaluation (good vs. bad), potency (powerful vs. weak), and activity (active vs. inactive) (EPA) are the three universal dimensions of meaning identified by Osgood and his colleagues in their cross-cultural research (e.g., Osgood, May, and Miron 1975). The evaluation dimension gauges approval or disapproval; it reflects judgments about morality (good vs. bad), aesthetics (beautiful vs. ugly), hedonism (pleasant vs.

unpleasant), and utility (useful vs. useless). The potency dimension reflects judgments of strength (strong vs. weak), size (big vs. little), and force (powerful vs. powerless). The activity dimension reflects assessments of perceptual stimulation (noisy vs. quiet), speed (fast vs. slow), age (young vs. old), and keenness (sharp vs. dull). Judgments on one criterion tend to generalize to the other criteria. For example, concepts rated as good tend also to be rated as beautiful and pleasant; concepts rated as powerful tend also to be rated as strong and big; and concepts rated as active tend also to be rated as noisy and sharp (Heise 1992).

We summarize our three three-part stigma sentiment hypotheses below: Self-Identity Hypotheses 1a-1c: Among juvenile delinquents, the (a) evaluation, (b) potency, and (c) activity of "a juvenile delinquent" will be related positively to the corresponding dimensions of "myself as I usually am."

Self-Identity Hypotheses 2a-2c: Among nonpatients, the (a) evaluation, (b) potency, and (c) activity of "a juvenile delinquent" will be *un*related to the corresponding dimensions of "myself as I usually am."

Self-Identity Hypotheses 3a-3c: The relationship between the (a) evaluation, (b) potency, and (c) activity of "a juvenile delinquent" and the corresponding dimension of "myself as I usually am" among delinquents will be more positive than this relationship among nondelinquents.

Construct Validity of Measures of Cultural Conceptions

The use of evaluation-potency-activity profiles to represent cultural conceptions of juvenile delinquents offers at least two general strengths. First, researchers in a variety of areas, such as affect control theory (e.g., Heise 1978, 2007; Rashotte 2002; Smith,

Matsuno, and Ike 2001; Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988), psychiatry (Marks 1965), the sociology of emotions (e.g., Heise and Calhan 1995; Heise and Weir 1999), the sociology of meanings and attitudes (e.g., Kroska 2003; MacKinnon and Langford 1994; MacKinnon and Luke 2002; Nunnally 1961), and the sociology of self-identities (Kroska 2002; Lee 1998), have shown that EPA profiles are a parsimonious way to represent much of the meaning attached to a wide array of social concepts, including roles, selfidentities, behaviors, emotions, adjective modifiers, settings, and occupational identities. Therefore these measures provide a parsimonious and established way to assess selfmeanings and cultural meanings. Second, cross-cultural research in more than 20 cultures has shown that social concepts universally evoke affective responses along these three dimensions (Osgood et al. 1975; Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). Therefore these dimensions can be used to measure self-meanings and cultural conceptions of juvenile delinquents in most, if not all, populations. Finally, stigma sentiments (the EPA associated with "a juvenile delinquent") offer a way to operationalize the cultural conceptions of juvenile delinquents without relying on a researcher's or a culturally or historically specific understanding of these conceptions.

Despite the past success in using EPA profiles to represent the meanings associated with cultural categories and self-identities, we examine the construct validity of this measurement technique. First we use three techniques to investigate the construct validity of stigma sentiments as a measure of the cultural conceptions associated with juvenile delinquents.

Construct validity of stigma sentiments. First, we examine the relationship between stigma sentiments and the devaluation-discrimination (DD) index. We use Link's and his

colleagues' technique of averaging the DD items (see Link 1987; Link et al. 1987, 1989, 1997).¹ We expect each stigma sentiment to be related negatively to the DD index. *Construct Validity Hypotheses 1a-1c*: The (a) evaluation, (b) potency, and (c) activity of "a juvenile delinquent" will be related negatively to devaluation-discrimination expectations.

Second, we examine the relationship between the EPA ratings of "a juvenile delinquent" and the corresponding meanings of clearly stigmatized identities: a bad student, a person who hits their kids, a person who is disrespected, and a person who steals things when no one is looking. If these meanings are correlated, we will have further evidence that the EPA ratings of "a juvenile delinquent" are valid measures of the stigma associated with the juvenile delinquent label.

Construct Validity Hypotheses 2a-2c: The (a) evaluation, (b) potency, and (c) activity ratings of "a juvenile delinquent" will be correlated positively with the corresponding dimension of meaning associated with "a bad student," "a person who hits their kids," "a person who is disrespected," and "a person who steals things when no one is looking."

Finally, we examine the relationship between the EPA ratings of "a juvenile delinquent" and the corresponding meanings of four identities that are generally respected: a good student, a kid who always stays out of trouble, a man, and a woman. If

¹ We also applied principal-components factor 1 ctor analysis to the DD items and found that the items loaded onto two dimensions. The differences between the factors, however, appeared to be a function of the item wording: all the reverse-coded items and one nonreverse-coded item loaded on one factor, and the five remaining nonreverse-coded items loaded on the other. We also could find no clear substantive difference between the two factors. In addition, the construct validity results did not differ substantively when we used the factor scores from this analysis rather than the DD index average. Specifically, one of the two DD factors was unrelated to the EPA of a juvenile delinquent, while the other was related to the EPA in the same way as the average of the items.

these meanings are uncorrelated or correlated negatively, we will have evidence that the EPA ratings of "a juvenile delinquent" do not represent something unrelated to stigma. *Construct Validity Hypotheses 3a-3c*: The (a) evaluation, (b) potency, and (c) activity ratings of "a juvenile delinquent" will not be correlated positively with the corresponding dimension of meaning associated with "a good student," "a kid who always stays out of trouble," "a man," and "a woman."

METHODS

Data

We investigate our hypotheses with a sample of juvenile delinquents and a sample of college students recruited from introductory sociology classes.

Juvenile delinquent sample.

The juvenile delinquent sample comes via a process evaluation of a Networked Aftercare System in a medium sized city in the southern United States. This evaluation collected comprehensive questionnaires from delinquents at intake into their intervention, discharge, and follow-ups at three month intervals. An addendum questionnaire with the items we use in this research was added and administered along with the surveys collected in the project above from the summer of 2004 to the summer of 2005. The fluid nature of the population we gathered data from necessitated collecting data from delinquents at varying stages of involvement in the intervention program. We use only data from the first administration of the EPA profiles for each delinquent. We gathered such data from 117 youths.

College student sample. We collected college student data with a group administered

questionnaire in introductory sociology classes (covering all but one small class) at a western state university in spring 2007. We gathered data from 312 respondents. *Dependent Variables*

Self-meanings are the evaluation (good vs. bad), potency (powerful vs. weak), and activity (active vs. inactive) of "myself as I usually am" (self-identity) and "myself as others see me" (reflected appraisals). The dimensions were measured with nine-point semantic differential scales. The evaluation scale was anchored with the adjective pairs "good" and "bad," the potency scale with "powerful" and "powerless," and activity with "fast, noisy" and "slow, quiet." The middle circle was marked "neutral"; the circles between the midpoint and the endpoints were marked with "infinitely," "slightly," "quite," and "extremely." These were coded with values ranging from -4 to +4. Thus -4 is infinitely bad/powerless/quiet; -3.0 is extremely bad/powerless/quiet; -2.0 is quite bad/powerless/quiet; -1.0 is slightly bad/powerless/quiet; 0.0 is neutral, neither bad nor good, powerful/active; +2.0 is quite good/powerful/active; +3.0 is extremely good/powerful/active; and +4.0 is infinitely good/powerful/active. To reduce response sets, we randomized the direction of the adjectives across the stimuli.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Independent Variables

Juvenile delinquent is a binary variable coded 1 if the respondent has been adjudicated delinquent by a juvenile court. All 97 of the respondents from the Mobile sample are coded as 1, and 9 of 285 college student respondents are coded as 1.

Stigma sentiments are operationalized with the evaluation, potency, and activity

associated with "a juvenile delinquent." *Stigmatized identity meanings* are the evaluation, potency, and activity associated with a bad student, a person who hits their kids, a person who is disrespected. *Respected identity meanings* are the evaluation, potency, and activity associated with a good student, a kid who always stays out of trouble, a man, and a woman. We measured all these meanings with the semantic differential scales described above.

Devaluation-discrimination expectations are operationalized with a modified version of Link's (1997) 14-item index designed to measure stigma beliefs regarding the mentally ill (see Appendix). We have devaluation-discrimination data from only the college student respondents. The instructions for this portion of the survey stated:

This portion of the survey asks you to report your perceptions of what most people believe and how they behave. There are no correct answers. Please circle your response. The response options for each statement ranged from 1, which was marked "strongly agree," to 6, marked "strongly disagree." Eight of the 14 items we used were reverse coded. We conducted factor analysis on the items and determined that two of the items (#9 and #11) had weak loadings, so we dropped them. Devaluation-discrimination reflects the average of the remaining 12 items.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

RESULTS

Construct Validity Hypotheses 1-3: Stigma Sentiments

Table 2 shows the results for Construct Validity Hypotheses 1a-c. In line with Hypotheses 1a, the evaluation and the potency of "a juvenile delinquent" (a JD) is related negatively to the devaluation-discrimination score. Contrary to Construct Validity Hypotheses 1b and 1c, however, the potency and the activity of "a juvenile delinquent" are unrelated to the DD score. Thus the results displayed in Table 2 suggest that the evaluation a JD capture sentiments similar to those captured in the devaluation-discrimination index, but that a JD's potency and activity does not.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 displays results for Construct Validity Hypotheses 2 and 3. The results generally support Hypothesis 2a. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the evaluation, potency, and activity of a juvenile delinquent is correlated positively with the corresponding dimension of the stigmatized identities. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the evaluation, potency, and activity of a juvenile delinquent is *not* positively with the corresponding dimension of the stigmatized identities.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Stigma Sentiments and Self-Meanings

Table 4 displays results relevant to the Self-Identity Hypotheses. The dependent variable in the models is the evaluation, potency, and activity of "myself as I usually am." The independent variables in all the models include gender, age, race, and stigma sentiments (EPA of "a juvenile delinquent"). Model 1 shows that juvenile delinquents evaluate themselves less positively than do non-delinquents, but they do not differ from non-delinquents in self-potency and self-activity.

Model 2 includes marginally significant interactions (p < .10) between JD status and a stigma sentiment. The results for Model 2 in Table 4 address the Self-Identity Hypotheses. As predicted in Self-Identity Hypothesis 1a, the evaluation of a JD is positively related to delinquents' self-evaluation (b = .202, se = .074, p = .007). Consistent with Self-Identity

Hypothesis 2a, the evaluation of a JD is unrelated to non-delinquents' self-evaluation (evaluation of "myself as I usually am") (b = -.038, se = .053, p = .471). Consistent with Self-Identity Hypothesis 3a, the two slopes are significantly different (b = .240, se = .090, p = .008). The two slopes are displayed in Figure 1. In this and the other figures, "low" on a stigma sentiment is one standard deviation below that mean. "High" is one standard deviation above the mean. The variables that are not part of the interaction are held at their means. As shown in Figure 1, delinquents who consider "a juvenile delinquent" especially good register a self-evaluation of 2.14, a value that is in the "quite good" range, whereas delinquents who consider "a juvenile delinquent" of 1.48, which is in the "slightly good" range. By contrast, non-delinquents' self-evaluation is unaffected by their evaluation of a JD; regardless of that rating, they see themselves as quite good, with range of only 2.45 to 2.32.

FIGURES 1-4 ABOUT HERE

Model 2 of the self-evaluation equation shows two unexpected cross-dimensional results: both the potency and the activity of a JD interact with delinquency status in the self-evaluation model. Among non-delinquents, the potency of a JD is unrelated to self-evaluation (b = -.018, se = .041, p = .661), but among delinquents, the potency of a JD is negatively related to selfevaluation (b = -.253, se = .070, p = .0004). These differential slopes are displayed in Figure 2. In addition, among non-delinquents, the activity of a JD is unrelated to self-evaluation (b = -.023, se = .036, p = .519), but among delinquents, the potency of a JD is positively related to selfevaluation (b = .171, se = .064, p = .008). These slopes are displayed in Figure 3.

The second set of models in Table 4 shows the relationship between stigma sentiments and self-potency. Contrary to Self-Identity Hypothesis 1b, the potency of a juvenile delinquent is not related to the juvenile delinquents' self-potency (b = .076, se = .083, p = .367). Also contrary to Hypothesis 2b, the potency of a juvenile delinquent is (negatively) related nondelinquents' self-potency, although the effect is only marginally significant (b = -.095, se = .054, p = .081). However, the significant positive interaction between delinquency potency and JD potency (b = .170, se = .094, p = .071) is approaches consistency with Hypothesis 3b provides limited support for the expectation that the slope for delinquents would be more positive than the slope for non-delinquents.

We report no Model 2 for self-activity because the interaction between delinquency status and the activity of a JD did not achieve significance. Thus, we find no support for Self-Identity Hypotheses 3a-3c.

DISCUSSION

Using new measures, we investigated the modified labeling theory hypothesis that the cultural conceptions associated with juvenile delinquents become personally relevant to individuals who have been adjudicated delinquent by a court. We operationalized the cultural conceptions of juvenile delinquents with stigma sentiments: the evaluation, potency, and activity associated with the cultural category "a juvenile delinquent." Also, we operationalized self-meaning with the EPA associated with self-identities ("myself as I usually am"). We expected stigma sentiments to be related positively to the corresponding dimensions of self-meaning among the psychiatric patients and to be unrelated among the nonpatients. Our results generally support the labeling theory hypotheses and suggest the usefulness of these new measures.

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Appendix. Modified Version of Devaluation-Discrimination Index (Link 1987; Link et al. 1997)

- 1. Most people would willingly accept a former juvenile delinquent as a close friend.
- 2. Most people believe that a person who has been in a juvenile justice treatment program is just as intelligent as the average person.
- 3. Most people believe that a former juvenile delinquent is just as trustworthy as the average person.
- 4. Most people would accept a fully rehabilitated juvenile delinquent as a teacher of young children in public school.
- 5. Most people believe that entering a juvenile justice treatment program is a sign of personal failure.
- 6. Most people would not hire a former juvenile delinquent to take care of their children, even if he or she had been rehabilitated for some time.7. Most people think less of a person who has been in a juvenile justice treatment program.
- 8. Most employers will hire a former juvenile delinquent if he or she is qualified for the job.
- 9. Most employers will pass over the application of a former juvenile delinquent in favor of another applicant.
- 10. Most people in my community would treat a former juvenile delinquent just as they would treat anyone.
- 11. Most young women would be reluctant to date a man who has been in a juvenile justice treatment program for a serious crime.
- 12. Once they know a person was in a juvenile justice treatment program, most people will take his or her opinions less seriously.

- 13. Most people believe that a man who has been in a juvenile justice treatment program is dangerous.
- 14. Most people are afraid of those people who have been wards of juvenile justice treatment programs.

	Juvenile Delinquents (N = 97)		Non-Delinquents $(N = 285)$	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Self-Meanings:				
Myself as I usually am				
Evaluation	1.74	1.84	2.38	.94
Potency	.98	1.94	.49	1.55
Activity	1.38	1.86	.88	1.49
Stigma Sentiments:				
A juvenile delinquent				
Evaluation	65	1.88	-1.78	1.43
Potency	09	2.12	-1.25	1.94
Activity	.46	2.13	.94	2.11
Controls				
Female	.31	.46	.66	.48
Age	16.20	1.97	19.71	2.58
Black $(0 = other)$.63	.49	.12	.32
Asian $(0 = other)$.07	.26	.41	.49

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables in the Analyses

Independent Variables	Devaluation-D	Devaluation-Discrimination		
A Juvenile Delinquent				
Evaluation	084***	084***		
	(.0231)	(.023)		
Potency	.017	.015		
	(.018)	(.018)		
Activity	.001	.002		
	(.016)	(.016)		
Female		019		
		(.066)		
Age		013		
		(.014)		
Intercept	.384	.644		
	(.056)	(.283)		
R^2	.044	.047		

Table 2. OLS Regressions of Devaluation-Discrimination Score on EPA of "A Juvenile Delinquent" Among College Students (N = 292)

Notes: Coefficients are unstandardized; standard errors are in parentheses.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

Stigmatized Identities		Respected Identities	
A bad student		A kid who always stays out of trouble	
Evaluation	.370***	Evaluation	215**
Potency	.123*	Potency	167**
Activity	.160**	Activity	007
A person who hits their kids		A good student	
Evaluation	.364***	Evaluation	187**
Potency	.050	Potency	208**
Activity	.193***	Activity	068
A person who is disrespected		A man	
Evaluation	014	Evaluation	.018
Potency	.119*	Potency	022
Activity	.048	Activity	
A person who steals things when no one is looking		A woman	
Evaluation	.270***	Evaluation	.008
Potency	.183***	Potency	018
Activity		Activity	052
	020		

Table 3. Correlations Between the Evaluation, Potency, and Activity of "A Juvenile Delinquent" and the Corresponding Dimensions of Stigmatized and Respected Identities (N = 385)

† p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests)

	"Myself As I Usually Am"				
	Evaluation		Potency		Activity
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1
Juvenile Delinquent (JD)	629**	602**	.296	.391	.143
(0 = non-delinquent)	(.199)	(.226)	(.257)	(.261)	(.245)
Female	.261†	.302*	419*	436*	144
	(.135)	(.133)	(.179)	(.179)	(.171)
Age	006	008	020	016	066*
	(.026)	(.026)	(.035)	.035)	(.033)
Black $(0 = other)$.222	.268			
	(.174)	(.173)			
Asian $(0 = other)$			437*	414*	305†
· · ·			(.190)	(.189)	(.181)
"A Juvenile Delinquent"					
Evaluation	.035	038	110†	121*	.054
	(.044)	(.053)	(.057)	(.058)	(.054)
Potency	073*	018	049	095†	106*
	(.036)	(.041)	(.048)	(.054)	(.046)
Activity	.020	023	007	009	071†
	(.032)	(.036)	(.042)	(.042)	(.040)
JD x Evaluation of		.240**			
"A Juvenile Delinquent"		(.090)			
JD x Potency of		235**		.170†	
"A Juvenile Delinquent"		(.082)		(.094)	
JD x Activity of		.194**			
"A Juvenile Delinquent"		(.073)			
Intercept	2.253	2.237	1.100	.953	2.433
	(.534)	(.532)	(.718)	(.720)	(.686)
R^2	.075	.110	.059	.067	.068

Table 4. OLS Regressions of the Evaluation, Potency, and Activity (EPA) of "Myself As I Usually Am" on
the EPA of "A Juvenile Delinquent" and Controls $(N = 382)$

Notes: Coefficients are unstandardized; standard errors are in parentheses.

† p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests)







